



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

ART. IX. — RELIGIOUS LIBERTY.

No one accustomed to the study in history of the course of opinion, or sensitive to the variations in the atmosphere of thought, can doubt that there is a religious movement now going on in America corresponding in many respects to a similar movement in England and on the continent of Europe, — a movement undermining the influence of long-established creeds, and tending to break down still further the authority of the old churches. It would be difficult to enumerate all its signs. Some of them are obvious to the most careless observer. The general dissatisfaction with traditional theology, not confined to any one sect or denomination; the sceptical tone of science in regard to the dogmas on which the Church (using that word to include all the old sects of the Christian world) has rested its claim on the obedience of men; the sharp conflict between the upholders of the ancient dogmatic theology and the promoters of the new views in science; the renewed interest among the most thoughtful men in the study of metaphysics, and the profound dissatisfaction at the results, so far as religion is concerned, to which it seems to lead; the growth of so numerous and wide-spread a religious body as that of the Spiritualists; the almost corresponding growth of simple materialism as a speculative doctrine; the increasing number of religious men who are outside the Church, and who, in the language of the Church, are infidels, unbelievers, and atheists; — these are some of the signs of movement in religious thought, of revolution in the churches, of growth, we believe, in religious freedom. For these signs, many of which are regarded by good and intelligent people as of painful import, as symptoms of the decline of religion, as shocking in themselves and in their consequences, are really signs of religious life, — signs that the fundamental doctrine of all true religion, that of the responsibility of the individual to himself alone for his opinions, of the utter freedom of individual opinion, is gaining possession of the minds of men.

This doctrine is indeed revolutionary. It implies not only a

denial of authority in any church, in any tradition, in any dogma, to bind the soul of man, but it requires also a definition of religion different from that which any church has ever given or allowed.

The basis upon which every hitherto existing church has been founded is that of authority. All of the great religions of the world — Brahminism, Buddhism, the religion of Greece and Rome, Mahometanism, and Christianity as it has been hitherto understood by the majority of its professed ministers and disciples — have corresponded in this, that they have asserted an external authority over the souls of men, and have thence laid claim to their obedience, and required their acceptance of certain dogmas or creeds.* This authority has often been exercised to good purpose in restraining the passions and controlling the wills of men. The Church during the Middle Ages was the chief minister of civilization. But as civilization advances, the Church finds itself in a false position. Many of the dogmas now maintained by it are the obsolete fancies of the ignorant teachers of a dark age. The whole current of modern thought sets against the asserted authority by which doctrines were promulgated and are still maintained. Men are coming out of the cave of implicit belief. The churches are like the castles of feudalism, — grand and strong memorials of a past irrevocably gone. They are not fitted to the modern needs of mankind. The principle of authority in matters of religion is inconsistent with other principles which are com-

* "The Church teaches," says a recent writer in the *Dublin Review*, "and we need not say that God peremptorily commands, all men to submit to the Catholic Church."

In 1789 Pope Pius VI. delivered an allocution, in which he denounced "the liberty of thinking concerning religion as each man may please, and with impunity publishing his thoughts." In the famous Encyclical Letter of the 8th of December, 1864, the present Pope condemns those "who do not fear to foster that erroneous opinion, called by our predecessor, Gregory XVI., an insanity, viz. that liberty of conscience is each man's personal right." In such declarations as these the Roman Church shows itself logically consistent. But the claim from which they spring is made by all other churches as well, that assert an external authority over the minds of men, or maintain that their creeds define the limits of religious truth. The eighteenth of the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion of the Church of England contains the following words: "They also are to be had accursed that presume to say that every man shall be saved by the law or sect which he professeth, so that he be diligent to frame his life according to that law and the light of nature."

mon to thinking men. The doctrine is, indeed, maintained and accepted by vast numbers; it is at the very heart of the religion of multitudes; but the more intelligent part of mankind is already emancipated from its yoke, and the advance of enlightenment is destroying its power over the minds of the mass of civilized men.

The principle of authority is indeed contrary to the very nature of religion, properly understood. However religion may be defined, it will be admitted by all that it involves the idea of duty on the part of man. Now, for the fit performance of duty, man must be free. Ideally, as a moral agent, he must possess unconditioned freedom. The sense of absolute duty to be fulfilled is the profoundest source of the conviction of the right to freedom. The more truly religious a man is, the more will he insist on this right. "The claim of right is based on the sense of duty." Freedom is the corollary of religion. Many religious men have indeed accepted and bowed to the authority of church and creed. The relation between religion and freedom is even yet very imperfectly understood, and the recognition of their mutual dependence is the late growth of the thought of modern times. The truth of the principle of the inalienable right of man to liberty in his political relations is of too recent discovery, and is not yet so generally acknowledged, that it should be matter of surprise that the more abstract principle of the right to liberty in religion, and the dependence of true religion upon the moral freedom of man, has still to make its way in the world, and has yet a hard battle to fight to win possession of mankind.

No creed can be made broad enough to serve as the exact statement of the religion of two souls. Religion is the most private and personal part of the life of every man. As no two men in the multitudes of the earth are alike in constitution or spiritual experience, so religion is a new, a different, a peculiar thing for each separate soul. Each man must, by the very nature of his being, be individually responsible for his religion. It is no more to be accomplished vicariously, than the goodness of a man is to consist in another's, and not his own, virtue. Any creed which claims an external authority over the souls of men, disregarding of the spiritual independence of the individ-

ual, is a human device hostile alike to liberty and religion. "The faith that stands on authority is not faith. The reliance on authority measures the decline of religion."

The doctrine of authority has wrought its worst effect in practically divorcing religion from life ; in fostering the notion that religion consists in the performance of certain acts, and the abstaining from other acts ; in giving a fictitious value to ordinances, to forms, to ceremonies and devotions ; in turning religion into a system of penalties and rewards ; in limiting its possession to the faithful, to the true believers, to a sect, or to a class of subjects by whatever name they might be called. The religion of the churches has been a thing of the few. The great world of men has lain under condemnation, till the very brotherhood of man has come to be understood as a brotherhood of eternal and infinite inequality. Religion has consequently been regarded as a thing belonging to a class. It has had its special ministers, and these have been erected into a caste.

The false teaching of these ministers of the churches which arrogated to themselves authority in matters of religion, the systems of theology which they have invented and maintained, the follies and errors which they have substituted for truth, and the constant attempt which they have made to bind the consciences and intellects of men, have been the most fertile source of irreligion and indifference. Men have been taught to regard religion as hostile to free inquiry, and to the independence of the reason. The choice lying between moral freedom and the doctrines of the Church, many men, knowing religion only as presented to them by the Church, have turned from the whole system with bitterness and disgust. They sought for bread and a stone was given them, which they flung away. Many have acquiesced in error through wont, or superstition, or timidity. Many have held to it from inability to separate from it the truth which was mingled with it, and which was precious to them. Many have been confused concerning the nature of religion itself. In the name of Religion, Religion has been persecuted ; in her own name liberty has been denied to her, and in her name blasphemy has been committed against the spirit of God in man.

But let us not be misunderstood. Religion has existed in all ages within as well as without the Church. Errors of opinion, false creeds, irrational dogmas, are in many instances comparatively harmless, and the most illiberal speculative opinions may coexist with true liberality of heart and of life. Many a preacher is freer than his creed. The religious sentiment may be pure, even when the forms in which it expresses itself are perverted. The doctrine of authority may be professed by one who practically believes in the principle of liberty. The right which the infidel or the liberal claims for himself to be religious in his own way, he must concede with all readiness to the orthodox of whatever name. There is quite as much risk of a bigotry of liberalism as of a bigotry of orthodoxy ; quite as much intolerance among radicals as among conservatives ; and quite as much pride of opinion among those who reject all dogmas as among those who cling to doctrines venerable on account of their antiquity and dear as having been the sources of comfort and of strength to the best men in the past. All we claim is, that every man be left free to obey his own intelligence ; all we deny is, that any church has authority to speak in the name of religion, or that religion itself is a fetter upon human freedom.

It is not, indeed, to be forgotten, that the false systems which have usurped the place of religion have in past times “ had a certain adaptation to the ignorance, the barbarism, the low state of morals, and the perverted condition of society existing contemporaneously with them.” In the absence of correct notions of religion, in the early stages of thought concerning it, these systems have nourished in many hearts the sentiments of piety, and have subdued the passions and violence of men by their threats and their appeals. And so long as ignorance and barbarism exist in the very heart of our highest civilization, these systems will continue to offer a substitute for true religion to those who are incompetent to apprehend or be affected by the truth.

But as these systems are based upon a principle not only at war with the very nature of religion, but also with the animating spirit of modern society, the influence which they have heretofore possessed is rapidly diminishing, and there is risk

lest the decline of their power should be accompanied in the minds of those formerly subject to them by a reaction against religion itself. This danger is only to be met by enlightening men as to the true nature of religion, and by showing them that it is not only compatible with freedom, but cannot, in its highest manifestations, exist unaccompanied by perfect liberty of conscience and of reason.

What, then, is religion? What definition is wide enough to include the religion of the race, and at the same time so exact as to express only what is essential to the idea?

Two of the most eminent thinkers in England have recently given each a definition of religion, a comparison of which may serve to exhibit the difference in the views that are held regarding the subject by the most enlightened men, and the insufficiency of the common notions of the meaning of the word, while it may also assist us in the attempt to interpret its essential significance.

In his lecture before the Royal Institute of British Architects, Mr. Ruskin says:—

“ Superstition in all times and among all nations is the fear of a spirit whose passions are those of a man, whose acts are the acts of a man; who is present in some places, not in others; who makes some places holy, and not others; who is kind to one person, unkind to another; who is pleased or angry according to the degree of attention you pay to him, or praise you refuse to him; who is hostile generally to human pleasure, but may be bribed by sacrifice of a part of that pleasure into permitting the rest. This, whatever form of faith it colors, is the essence of superstition. And religion is the belief in a Spirit whose mercies are over all his works,—who is kind even to the unthankful and the evil; who is everywhere present, and therefore is in no place to be sought, and in no place to be evaded; to whom all creatures, times, and things are everlastingly holy, and who claims, not tithes of wealth nor sevenths of days, but all the wealth we have, and all the days we live, and all the beings that we are, but who claims that totality because He delights only in the delights of His creatures; and because, therefore, the one duty they owe to Him, and the only service they can render Him, is to be happy. A Spirit, therefore, whose eternal benevolence cannot be angered, cannot be appeased; whose laws are everlasting and inexorable, so that heaven and earth must pass away if one jot of them failed; laws which attach to every wrong and error a meas-

ured inevitable penalty, to every rightness and prudence an assured reward,—penalty of which the remittance cannot be purchased, and reward of which the promise cannot be broken.”

The foregoing passage is an eloquent statement of the nature of the sentiment toward God, and of some of the thoughts concerning him becoming in one whose religion is based upon belief in his existence and faith in his overruling providence. It is hardly to be considered as an exact and philosophic account of the absolute conditions of religion, and it is imperfect as a definition, because it omits notice of the fact that there may be religion without a definite faith in the existence and providence of a Divine Being. “To have no God and to talk of religion is,” says Mr. Mill, “to the feelings of at least nine tenths of English readers, at once an absurdity and an impiety.” But he adds,—the passage is in his *Essay on Comte*,—“Though conscious of being in an extremely small minority, we venture to think that a religion may exist without a belief in a God, and that a religion without a God may be, even to Christians, an instructive and profitable object of contemplation.” He might well have added, that it is necessary for the student of opinion to contemplate it from the fact, that serious and high-minded men who are without a belief in God yet claim to have a religion, and conform their lives to its dictates, and find in it sufficient motives for duty and sufficient grounds for happiness. He goes on:—

“What, in truth, are the conditions necessary to constitute a religion? There must be a creed, or conviction, claiming authority over the whole of human life; a belief, or set of beliefs, deliberately adopted, respecting human destiny and duty, to which the believer inwardly acknowledges that all his actions ought to be subordinate. Moreover, there must be a sentiment connected with this creed, or capable of being invoked by it, sufficiently powerful to give it, in fact, the authority over human conduct to which it lays claim in theory. It is a great advantage (though not absolutely indispensable) that this sentiment should crystallize, as it were, round a concrete object; if possible a really existing one, though, in all the more important cases, only ideally present. Such an object Theism and Christianity offer to the believer; but the condition may be fulfilled, if not in a manner strictly equivalent, by another object. It has been said that whoever believes in ‘the Infinite nature of Duty,’ even if he believe in nothing else, is religious. M.

Comte believes in what is meant by the infinite nature of duty, but he refers the obligations of duty, as well as all sentiments of devotion, to a concrete object, at once ideal and real, — the Human Race, conceived as a continuous whole, including the past, the present, and the future. This great collective existence, this ‘Grand Être,’ as he terms it, though the feelings it can excite are necessarily very different from those which direct themselves toward an ideally perfect Being, has, as he forcibly urges, this advantage in respect to us, that it really needs our services, which Omnipotence cannot in any genuine sense of the term be supposed to do; and M. Comte says, that, assuming the existence of a Supreme Providence (which he is as far from denying as from affirming), the best and even the only way in which we can rightly worship or serve Him is by doing our utmost to love and serve that other Great Being, whose inferior Providence has bestowed on us all the benefits that we owe to the labors and virtues of former generations. It may not be consonant to usage to call this a religion, but the term so applied has a meaning, and one which is not adequately expressed by any other word. Candid persons of all creeds may be willing to admit, that, if a person has an ideal object, his attachment and sense of duty toward which are able to control and discipline all his other sentiments and propensities, and prescribe to him a rule of life, that person has a religion; and though every one naturally prefers his own religion to any other, all must admit that if the object of this attachment and of this feeling of duty is the aggregate of our fellow-creatures, this religion of the infidel cannot, in honesty and conscience, be called an intrinsically bad one. Many, indeed, may be unable to believe that this object is capable of gathering round it feelings sufficiently strong; but this is exactly the point on which a doubt can hardly remain in an intelligent reader of M. Comte; and we join with him in condemning, as equally irrational and mean, the conception of human nature as incapable of giving its love and devoting its existence to any object which cannot afford in exchange an eternity of personal enjoyment.”

This admirable statement of Mr. Mill presents the difficulty as it at present stands in regard to the idea which should attach to the word “religion.” If it be not consonant to usage to call that a religion which Mr. Mill terms “the religion of the infidel,” it is because those who have hitherto mainly used the word have confined it to the acceptance of certain definite opinions, or to the performance of certain definite acts, and have not considered it in its absolute significance.

For it is not merely from *a priori* considerations, but from

the study of thought and of the facts of life as they exist around us, that we arrive at the conclusion that the nature of religion, justly conceived, consists not in the acceptance of any special opinions, such, for example, as those concerning the existence or non-existence of God, nor in the performance of any special acts, such, for instance, as prayer or worship, but in an attitude of the will. If we use familiar phraseology, we may say that in an enlightened man this attitude of the will results from his recognition of what is called the spiritual nature of the soul, and finds expression in endeavors to meet the responsibility of leading a life conformed to the highest attainable conceptions of the duty of man as a spiritual being. But in more exact terms, we may define religion as a man's devotion—that is, the complete assent and concentration of his will—to any object which he acknowledges to have a right to his entire service, and to supreme control over his life.

But it may be objected that this definition does not sufficiently divide religion from morality. The objection, however, is without force. Whatever opinion we may hold of the nature of religion and morality, and of the relation between them, it will be universally agreed that they both are realized in the practical nature of man, in what is called his character, in the moulding of his volitions and desires, in the determination of his acts. Both are concerned with duty in the broadest sense of that word, and religious and moral duties are often indistinguishable. But the duties which are properly religious, and the acts which are, or are believed to be, of a religious character, are distinguished by the predominance of two marks;—first, the absolute and unconditional nature of their obligation; and secondly, their independence of relation to secondary object or end. Religion is matter of absolute requirement; morals is a science and practice of the higher expediency. Religion and morality are thus found to be definable and distinguishable, without reference to creeds or codes.

Such a conception of religion as this is alone consistent with that spiritual liberty, that freedom of thought, which is the prerogative of every individual, and without which religion is but a form of superstition. The absolute and unconditional obligation of the duties of religion is not a limitation of human

freedom, but is, on the contrary, the authoritative warrant and sanction of that freedom. To determine what it is that has a right to hold supreme control over his life, is the exercise by man of the highest act of complete liberty; and the performance of the duties imposed upon him by religion is a constant manifestation of his freedom. The discharge of these duties is indeed not only a manifestation of freedom, but also a continual gain of freedom, in delivering man from the subjection of his baser passions and appetites, from the bondage of error, and the terrors of superstition. Religion is no less essential to liberty than liberty to religion.

Justly understood, religion exercises no restraint over the intelligence of man. The conflict which has long been supposed to exist between science and religion has in fact been simply a conflict between the principle of freedom and that of authority; in other words, between true religion and superstition. True religion has always been on the side of science, and science is always on the side of religion. Every advance in knowledge, every gain in intelligence, every step in truth, is in the interest of religion; and the freer thought becomes, the more and the better does it serve the cause of religion. It is in great measure because religion has generally hitherto been represented as hostile to free inquiry, because the authorized ministers of the doctrines set forth as exclusively religious have often been the bitterest enemies of freedom of thought, and have often leagued themselves with the opponents of political liberty, that the influence of religion in the modern world has been so irregular, imperfect, and disproportioned to its proper claims. But religion truly conceived is the highest incitement and support for the exercise of all the faculties of the understanding. It is not religion that has repressed the efforts of the reason, or refused to accept the truth discovered from age to age.

In such a view of religion as that which has now been set forth, theist and atheist, Christian and infidel, find ground for union in mutual charity, confidence, and help,—for common labor in the endless work to advance mankind in virtue and happiness. The right of man to liberty in religion, the right and the duty of free thinking, the acknowledgment of the prin-

ciple of the responsibility of every man to himself alone for the opinions which he may hold,—these are in truth the very source and foundation of religious charity. Where true liberty exists, there true charity is found. The doctrine of toleration is the substitute of the churches for the law of love. It has its origin in the notion of an external authority over opinion. It is mere presumption for a man to profess to tolerate opinions which differ from his own. In the light of such truth as he may hold, each man labors on equal terms.

No one will suppose us to assert that all religious opinions are equally wise or equally effective of good results upon the character of those who profess them. The point simply is, that no man has the right to condemn others for not holding the opinions that seem to him true. If the teaching of Christ had been better understood, if it had not been perverted by the passions and errors of his nominal followers, the most earnest and devout Christian would find nothing unfamiliar in a conception of religion wide enough to embrace the spiritual aspirations and endeavors of mankind. It is because the churches have misread the words of Christ, that this now seems hard doctrine. They have made Christianity to consist of the flesh which profiteth nothing, and have lost the spirit that quickeneth. “The hour cometh, and now is, when ye shall neither in this mountain nor yet at Jerusalem worship the Father.” Rome, Geneva, Westminster, have taken the place of the mountain or of Jerusalem. The religion of Jesus was a religion universal,—a religion of the spirit, and not of forms,—of works, and not of doctrines. The Christianity of the churches has been a religion of exclusion, of forms, and of creeds.

But the time is at hand when this is to end. The spirit of the teaching of Jesus is gaining its true power over the world. The churches are failing, and there is a new birth of religion. Men are rejecting all ecclesiastical organizations that attempt to set bounds to religion, or to enclose the spirit in a form of words. That spirit, that religion which is the corner-stone of our modern society, the religion, the Christianity of America, rejects all bonds, claims all men as hers, receives all as equal brothers, makes no distinctions in love, feasts with publicans, sinners, and infidels, lifts the lowest and most forlorn to her

heart, binds the whole nation in indissoluble union, is popular, is democratic, is individual, is universal.

A truly spiritual and rational religion, like genuine political liberty, can exist in any large measure only in highly civilized and intelligent communities. The progress of true religion depends on the progress of men in self-respect, self-control, and right reason. And to secure this progress, after the infancy of society is passed, freedom is requisite. It is because our community is the freest that the world has known, and is gaining, we believe, in that moral order which results from the qualities generated by freedom, that we look forward with confidence to the advance of true religion among us; and united with this confidence, we have the firmest faith that Christianity, as understood and taught by Jesus, not as interpreted by mediæval churches and their modern ministers, will be the supreme law and bond of our free society,—the law at once of liberty and love, the religion of perfect freedom.

ART. X.—CRITICAL NOTICES.

- 1.—*The Biographical Writings of JAMES PARTON.* Boston: Ticknor and Fields. 1866. 9 vols. 12mo.
 1. *Life and Times of Aaron Burr.* 2 vols.
 2. *Life of Andrew Jackson.* 3 vols.
 3. *Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin.* 2 vols.
 4. *General Butler in New Orleans.* 1 vol.
 5. *Famous Americans of Recent Times.* 1 vol.

THERE are episodes in the history of America of which the interest is universal, but the larger part of it has been unquestionably dull. The beginnings of a state, however powerful it may be about to become, retain their insignificance to the imagination until a light is poured back upon them from a distant future, which shows them in their true importance as the sources of succeeding greatness. Our past history is every year of more and more interest, as the people become more conscious of nationality; as the principles upon which our institutions rest manifest their effects more plainly; as the coun-